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Critical thinking and epistemic responsibility

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ABSTRACT: An argument developed by Michael Huemer raises doubts about the epistemic responsibility of taking a 'critical thinking' approach to belief formation. This paper takes issue with Huemer's depiction of critical thinking as an approach that rejects all reliance on the intellectual authority of others, and it offers a more realistic depiction. The paper ultimately contends that Huemer's argument fails because it rests on an impoverished and unaccountably individualistic notion of epistemic responsibility.

KEYWORDS: argument from authority, critical thinking, epistemic responsibility, expert testimony, social epistemology, virtue epistemology

1. INTRODUCTION

The justifications that are given for critical thinking, whether in education or daily life, too often rest on familiar refrains that resemble articles of faith more than principled argument. For this reason, reasoned skepticism about the value of critical thinking should be welcomed. Skeptical challenges force advocates of critical thinking to improve their accounts of why critical thinking is valuable and to seek out better theoretical foundations for critical thinking.

In this paper, I examine Michael Huemer's skeptical argument regarding the value of critical thinking, which he presents in "Is Critical Thinking Epistemically Responsible?". In that paper, Huemer questions the value of critical thinking as an approach to what he calls "controversial, publicly discussed issues." (Huemer, 2005, p. 524) What he has in mind are issues such as the gun control, the ethics of abortion, and creationism vs. evolution. Huemer makes the bold claim that, for the nonexpert, critical thinking is an inferior approach to forming beliefs regarding these issues. The implication that can be drawn from the title of the paper[1] is that it is at least doubtful that critical thinking is an epistemically responsible approach for these issues. In the end, I contend that Huemer's argument is defeatable, and I argue that the best way to overcome his argument involves stepping away from an

[1] Huemer never explicitly draws the connection to epistemic responsibility. The closest he comes is when he identifies the issue of his paper as being that of "the epistemic rationality of critical thinking." p. 528. The title of his paper suggests that Huemer equates epistemic responsibility and epistemic rationality. I don't equate the two; I limit the discussion in this paper to epistemic responsibility, which I take to be more appropriate to the question of the value of critical thinking.

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individualistic approach to epistemology and grounding critical thinking, at least partly, in social epistemology and virtue epistemology.

2. RELIABILITY AND EPISTEMIC RESPONSIBILITY

2.1 Huemer's reliability argument

Huemer takes aim at critical thinking as an approach for reaching true beliefs (and avoiding false beliefs) regarding certain contentious issues. To do this he sets out a strategy for belief formation that he characterizes as a minimal requirement of critical thinking. We'll refer to this approach as CT:[2]

> You gather the arguments and evidence that are available on the issue, from all sides, and assess them for yourself. You try thereby to form some overall impression on the issue. If you form such an impression, you base your belief on that. Otherwise, you suspend judgment. (Huemer, 2005, p. 523)

Huemer adds an important clarification regarding CT: it excludes any reliance on the intellectual authority of others. The assessment of evidence under CT does not include assessing the reliability of an expert and using that reliability assessment as a basis for accepting an opinion from that expert. And Huemer holds that this feature of CT is also a feature of critical thinking more broadly.

> I assume only that critical thinking requires *at least* this much: that one attempt to assess arguments and evidence on their merits, as opposed to relying on the intellectual authority of others….[C]ritical thinkers look only to the *reasons* the expert has for giving that answer. If they find those reasons wanting, then the expert's opinion will carry no weight with them. And even if they find the reasons cogent, the fact that the reasons were endorsed by the expert will give no *additional* force to the conclusion they support. (Huemer, 2005, p. 523)

We should think of CT strictly as an approach to belief formation and strip away any other roles for critical thinking. In competition with CT, Huemer asks us to recognize two other strategies for reaching our beliefs:

> *Credulity:* You canvas the opinions of a number of experts and adopt the belief held by most of them. In the best case, you find a poll of the experts; failing that, you may look through several books and articles and identify their overall conclusions.
>
> *Skepticism:* You form no opinion, that is, you withhold judgment about the issue. (Huemer, 2005, pp. 522-523)

Huemer takes it as the received view that CT "is the best of the three strategies, and certainly better than Credulity," but he argues that, at least with

[2] Huemer refers to this minimal notion by using only the uppercase 'Critical Thinking.' I use 'CT' to avoid confusing this minimal notion with 'critical thinking' in the full sense.

respect to controversial issues, CT is never the best strategy. (Huemer, 2005, pp. 523-524)

The first argument that Huemer presents to show the shortcomings of CT concerns its reliability. He asks us to consider controversial issues about which there is a consensus among the experts in the field. These would presumably be issues about which there is significant and fundamental disagreement, but it is limited to nonexperts. Huemer suggests that the issue of evolution vs. creationism is one example. (I'm hard-pressed to think of many others.) Huemer argues that Credulity is the superior strategy in cases like these and that CT is the inferior strategy because it never does better than Credulity.

If the nonexpert adopts CT as a strategy in this instance, one of three things can happen. The nonexpert could eventually agree with the experts. This might be a nice result for CT, but as far as reaching truth and avoiding error is concerned, the Credulity strategy would work just as well. The second possibility for the nonexpert who utilizes CT is that she disagrees with the consensus of experts. Given the experts' intelligence and their vast advantage in knowledge, it seems reasonable to conclude that the community of experts is far more likely to be right than the nonexpert is, so Credulity clearly beats CT here. The third possibility is that the CT-utilizing nonexpert suspends judgment. The CT-utilizer suffers an opportunity cost here. She forms no belief on an issue about which it is probably worthwhile to have a belief. Moreover, one of the available beliefs has a community of experts to vouch for it.

Next Huemer asks us to consider controversial issues about which there is no consensus among experts. There are undoubtedly many other vexed issues that would fit this description. In cases like these, Huemer argues that Skepticism is the superior strategy. Again he asks us to consider the possibilities. The nonexpert who adopts the CT strategy could reach a condition of suspended judgment, in which case CT offers no advantage over Skepticism, which prescribed suspended judgment from the outset. Or the nonexpert could follow CT and arrive at a determinate belief on the issue. In this case, Huemer asks us to consider whether such a belief should be trusted. With all the time and resources that the experts devoted to this issue, they have been unable to achieve a consensus. So it doesn't seem likely that any particular expert would be a reliable source regarding what is true, or right, with respect to this issue. So why should our nonexpert prove to be reliable on this issue?

So Huemer is arguing that either Credulity or Skepticism will come out on top every time. Whether you choose Credulity over Skepticism or Skepticism over Credulity depends on your aversion to error. If you have a strong aversion to error, you should follow Skepticism for any instance in which there is not a strong consensus among experts. If you have less aversion to error, you might follow Credulity in instances where a healthy majority of experts come down on one side rather than the other. But no matter what your aversion to error, CT is always inferior in its reliability.

2.2 Epistemic self-reliance and critical thinking

Before we evaluate Huemer's reliability argument, we should take a moment to appreciate the full extent of the epistemic self-reliance in CT. If CT is a minimal requirement of critical thinking, then reliance on the authority of experts is prohibited for the critical thinker. As the earlier quotation from Huemer makes clear, the critical thinker looks only to the reasons that the expert gives and not to the fact that the reasons have been given by an expert. According to Huemer's depiction of CT, "the fact that the reasons were endorsed by the expert will give no additional force to the conclusion they support." (Huemer, 2005, p. 523)

The view that CT is a minimal requirement of critical thinking would obviously be untenable if it were a claim about critical thinking with broad application, or about what we might call 'the critical thinking tradition.' Careful definitions of critical thinking (e.g., Fisher and Scriven, 1997, p. 21) make no mention of the sort of epistemic self-reliance that we find in CT. Moreover, many critical thinking textbooks (e.g., Fisher, 2011, pp. 83-113) actually present the evaluation of testimony and expert authority as important elements of critical thinking, presupposing that the endorsement of an opinion by an expert can be epistemically relevant. And the fact that appeal to authority in arguments is considered to be a part-time fallacy at best (see Coleman, 1995) suggests that within mainstream views of critical thinking, reliance on expert opinion is sometimes deemed acceptable.

I attribute to Huemer the far more defensible view that the epistemic self-reliance we find in CT is a minimal requirement of critical thinking about the "controversial, publicly discussed issues" that his paper is concerned with. This view has far more intuitive appeal, especially if we are talking about ethical and public policy issues. For ethical and public policy issues at least[3], I think that Huemer is on to something when he points to epistemic self-reliance as a requirement for critical thinking. Some degree of epistemic self-reliance is implicit in the notion of critical thinking, and I think we'd all agree that someone who relied entirely, or even mostly, on the authority of experts in reaching a belief about a controversial public policy issue would not be engaging in critical thinking. The question is what degree of epistemic self-reliance is a requirement for critical thinking. Is it the complete epistemic self-reliance of CT, or is it a limited epistemic self-reliance?

To justify his view that the epistemic self-reliance of CT is generally considered to be a minimal requirement of critical thinking, Huemer produces three quotations from prominent introductory textbooks that focus on reasoning about philosophical and ethical issues. Each seems to support the view that the extreme epistemic self-reliance of CT is essential to critical thinking. In each quotation, readers (i.e., students) are advised to "think difficult issues through for themselves." This quote from Louis Pojman is representative: "In this conversation, all sides of an issue should receive a fair hearing, and then you, the reader, should make up your own mind on the issue." (Pojman, 1991, p. 5).

[3] I would not grant this regarding the one scientific issue that Huemer includes among his "controversial, publicly discussed issues," that of creationism vs. evolution. This could raise further doubts about Huemer's argument, but they won't be raised in this paper.

But this argument should not convince us that the epistemic self-reliance within CT is a requirement for critical thinking about these issues. Given the context in which the quotations were written, it is far from clear that the authors were endorsing the view that experts' opinions on these issues should *never* carry weight. The quoted statements are addressed to students who are embarking on an ethics or philosophy course. While we can be sure the authors intend their advice to extend to the reading of the textbook and to activities in the corresponding course, we cannot conclude that the authors intend the advice to extend beyond the scope of the course to daily life. It seems more likely that the advice is intended largely as a short-term corrective to a group of (mostly young) people who might be overly reliant on authority in their thinking about ethical issues.

The question of what degree of epistemic self-reliance is appropriate to critical thinking needs to be addressed more carefully. And we need to be aware that there are options that stop well short of the complete epistemic self-reliance of CT.

Consider an example. Let's say that you are a nonexpert who reads and considers an argument—call it Argument X—on whether some form of assisted suicide should be legal, and you find it very persuasive. You've applied your critical thinking skills in evaluating Argument X and any contending argument you can find, and Argument X comes through with top marks. A short time later you learn that Argument X was written and developed by a world-renowned ethicist. Huemer would say that for the critical thinker, the information about the argument's origins should add nothing to your level of confidence in Argument X and its conclusion. Conversely, if you learn that Argument X was written by an anonymous blogger, this should take away nothing from your level of confidence.

But surely this goes too far. Most of us would be inclined to be more confident in Argument X when we learn that it originated with a well-regarded expert, and there is a sound basis for this inclination. You are a nonexpert (by hypothesis) and you are considering an argument about a subject matter in which the well-regarded expert has undoubtedly done considerable research over the years. Some humility on your part is surely appropriate. Once you take into account the likelihood that there are limitations in your understanding of the issue, you are quite right to be reassured when you learn that Argument X originated with a well-regarded expert. And by the same token should lose some confidence in Argument X if you learn it originates with an anonymous blogger. It's far more likely that there are gaps in the anonymous blogger's understanding of the issue than in the well-regarded expert's. As a nonexpert on the subject, you are not in a good position to identify those gaps. So even if you are approaching the issues from a critical-thinking frame of mind, learning that Argument X originated with a well-regarded expert is a legitimate basis for greater confidence in its conclusion.

To be clear, I'm not arguing that a critical thinking approach dictates that you have to be more confident in the conclusion when you learn that Argument X comes from an expert source, but in a situation like this it is surely epistemically permissible—and consistent with a critical thinking approach—to be more confident in a conclusion when you learn that it is championed by an expert on the issue.

Contra Huemer, critical thinking, even about the limited set of controversial, publicly discussed issues, is compatible with some reliance on the intellectual authority of others. But this is not to say that a critical thinking approach is compatible with reliance on just anyone's intellectual authority. Critical thinking still requires some degree of epistemic self-reliance. One sensible restriction on the reliance on epistemic authority, and one that falls squarely within the critical thinking tradition, is something like the following: One may rely on the intellectual authority of others only if that authority is reasonably established. Details of what it might mean for intellectual authority to be reasonably established can be found elsewhere in the literature of informal logic and social epistemology. (e.g., Goldman, 2011)

So to give critical thinking a fair hearing within Huemer's argument, we'll have to revise CT to give it a less stringent requirement of epistemic self-reliance. Doing this makes Huemer's reliability argument somewhat more difficult to evaluate, but I don't think it undermines the argument. Assessing arguments and evidence *for yourself* is still at the heart of a revised version of CT. The restricted reliance on expert authority that I've argued to be compatible with critical thinking comes into play only after the arguments and evidence have been assessed. This reliance on expert authority might change your level of confidence in your opinion, or it might even change your opinion in borderline cases in which your level of confidence was quite low to begin with, but it doesn't play a part in the initial formation of your opinion. So Huemer's reliability argument is not blocked at this point.

2.3 The limitations of Credulity and Skepticism

Having a reliable means of identifying experts is crucial to Huemer's reliability argument. To rely on the combination of Credulity and Skepticism that he puts forward as the preferred alternative to CT, you first need to identify the full range of relevant experts so that you can assess how much divergence of opinion there is among them. And the identification of experts comes into play again in the Credulity strategy, which has you canvass the opinions of experts and adopt the belief held by most of them.

Relying only on expert opinion in the identification of experts would lead to a regress of sorts, so Huemer grants that some element of critical thinking is necessary for the identification of trustworthy experts. He does that by offering the following clarification on his thesis:

> I contend only for the more modest thesis that, with respect to publicly discussed issues, one should usually not rely on one's own judgment and reasoning directly about the publicly discussed issue itself. This is compatible with the point that one *should* rely on one's own judgment and reasoning in determining which experts to rely on with regard to the publicly discussed issue. (Huemer, 2005, p. 529)

Huemer argues that there is no inconsistency involved in doubting the reliability of critical thinking with regard to forming beliefs and at the same time contending that

critical thinking is reliable enough for determining which experts to rely on. He reasons that it is much easier to determine whether a particular individual is an expert on an issue than it is to develop a sound opinion on that issue. The question of who is an expert does not require expertise in the same way that knowledge of the issue itself does. (Huemer, 2005, p. 530) Huemer goes on to suggest that followers of the Credulity and Skepticism strategies would identify experts in a way similar to that in which courts and legislatures identify expert witnesses, presumably by looking at things like credentials, publications, and peer-opinion.

We might grant that one can identify experts about controversial, publicly discussed issues in this manner, but for most of these issues it seems doubtful that we should base our beliefs on expert opinion. This is because of a fundamental difference between expertise regarding ethical and public policy issues and expertise on scientific and technical issues—the kinds of expertise that courts and legislatures generally tap when they call expert witnesses. In the case of experts on ethical or public policy issues, expertise rests on knowledge of the literature, the fact that peers judge one's reasoning and other research to conform to certain standards, and, perhaps, originality. But there is no apparent connection between this sort of expertise and the truth of the expert's opinion on the fundamental issue.

Compare this to the sort of expert who might be called to testify in court. Consider an engineer who is called to testify regarding whether the design and construction of a certain bridge conforms to professional and industry standards. Like an expert an issue in ethics or public policy, this expert has the right credentials and a demonstrated knowledge of the relevant domain, but this expert is testifying on the sort of issue that people know how to resolve, at least in principle. It's a matter of investigating the design and construction of the bridge and comparing what you learn to an antecedently agreed-upon set of professional and industry standards.

In a discussion of expertise, Alvin Goldman draws a distinction between primary and secondary questions in a domain. In Goldman's words:

> Primary questions are the principal questions of interest to researchers or students of a subject matter. Secondary questions concern the existing evidence or arguments that bear on the primary questions, and the assessments of the evidence made by prominent researchers. (Goldman, 2011, p. 115)

Using this distinction, Goldman identifies two senses of "expert." An expert in the strong sense has "an unusually extensive body of knowledge on both primary and secondary questions in the domain." An expert in the weak sense "merely has extensive knowledge on the secondary questions in the domain."

Adopting Goldman's terminology, it seems that experts on ethical or public policy issues can never be anything more than experts in weak sense. Consider an expert on the ethics of euthanasia. This expert knows all the important arguments and knows where all the other important figures in the literature stand and why. But we would not attribute to them knowledge of the primary questions of this issue—those of the conditions (if any) under which euthanasia is ethically

permissible. For this controversial ethical issue, and any other we can think of, knowledge of the primary questions is in dispute.

For many of the issues that Huemer has in mind then, there's no reason that the Credulity strategy will tend to lead us to the truth. To canvas the experts whose knowledge extends only to Goldman's secondary questions—those with an extensive knowledge of the debate but no advantage in answering the principle questions of interest—does not lead us any closer to the truth. This accords with our everyday practice and intuitions—most of us would never think of basing an ethical belief on the opinion of a body of experts without first undertaking an evaluation of those experts' arguments.

In fairness to Huemer's argument, it can be argued that his preferred combination of the Credulity and Skepticism strategies is doing everything it is supposed to do. It can be argued that there's nothing wrong with the Credulity strategy, it's just been misapplied to issues for which the Skepticism strategy is appropriate. Yes, there are ethical and public policy issues for which there is little connection between expert opinion and the truth of the matter, but these are the same issues on which you would not find anything approximating a consensus among experts. These are cases in which the Skepticism strategy should be used.

But if this is the case, it seems that Huemer's preferred combination of Credulity and Skepticism strategies would recommend Skepticism for virtually all ethical and public policy issues that are controversial. (If an ethical or public policy issue is at all controversial, is it likely to be the sort of issue that can be settled by a poll of expert opinion?) This leads us to reconsider the Skepticism strategy. We need to entertain serious doubts about its feasibility, especially if there are so many controversial, publicly discussed issues on which Skepticism is called for.

In a nutshell, the problem with the Skepticism strategy is that life has a way of impelling us to have opinions. Withholding judgment is often not a viable option. Adult members of democratic societies are called on to vote every few years and the question of who to vote for often rests in part on the candidate's stances on ethical and public policy issues. If we wish to exercise our votes responsibly, we'll need to have reasonable opinions on at least some of these issues. Inevitably this will include issues about which there is no consensus among the experts. This leaves the follower of the Skepticism strategy with no recourse. And another time that life forces us to have opinions is when we face difficult ethical decisions. Again it seems likely that many of these decisions require opinions on issues about which there is no consensus among experts. Again the Skepticism-follower has no recourse.

Huemer might say that these examples of choices that are forced (in some sense) are irrelevant because they don't bear on the truth-conduciveness of the Skepticism strategy. But if there are too many of these forced choices, the Skepticism strategy simply becomes infeasible and the question of truth-conduciveness becomes moot.

But suppose that we put *these* doubts about the feasibility of Credulity and Skepticism aside for the moment, and assume that those strategies are the best, most truth-conducive approaches to the controversial issues that we have in mind. We'll take for granted that the best means of gaining true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs when there is a consensus or near-consensus among experts is to adopt the

majority opinion among those experts. Or if there is nothing approximating a consensus among experts, our best approach is to simply withhold judgment. Now let's consider the fate of someone who adopts this strategy for investigating controversial, publicly discussed issues. In what position would this person be left after several years?

This situation is hard to imagine, but it seems to me that this person would have a body of beliefs that she could not defend with any principles or arguments other than those which justify the Credulity and Skepticism strategies. So if she's asked why she's in favor of certain forms of gun control, she might respond that most policy experts are in favor of those gun control measures. If she's asked why she has no opinion about whether certain forms of euthanasia are ethically permissible, she might simply respond that there's a wide diversity of opinion among experts on this issue. She's had no other reasons than these when she formed her beliefs, so any other reasons she could provide would evidently have to be made up on the spot, drawing on a scant base of whatever principles and arguments she can recall from the days when she assessed arguments for herself.

There's a problem here. Her system of beliefs wouldn't be doing everything we expect it to do. Of course, she could take extra measures to study the various arguments and principles associated with the positions she's adopted, merely for the sake of defending those positions. But if she's committed to Credulity and Skepticism as the best belief-formation strategies for issues like these, it seems pointless to offer any arguments other than appeals to authority. Doing so would merely encourage other nonexperts to persist in their discredited critical-thinking-based approaches.

I mention the fate of those who would implement the Credulity and Skepticism strategies both to raise further doubts about their feasibility for human beings and to suggest that there is much more at stake here than truth-conduciveness. The next section takes up the issue of whether, by centering his argument on truth-conduciveness, Huemer misses the mark regarding the epistemic responsibility of critical thinking.

2.4 Epistemic responsibility

Let's put aside any objections about the feasibility of following the Credulity and Skepticism strategies and assume that Huemer's argument succeeds in seeding doubts about critical thinking as a guide to an individual's gaining true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs. How would this bear on the question that Huemer asks in the title of his paper: Is critical thinking epistemically responsible?

I contend that Huemer's argument fails to properly address this question, because the most that his argument could achieve is to demonstrate that critical thinking is not as truth conducive as the combination of Credulity and Skepticism that he favors. To take the further step to the question of epistemic responsibility, Huemer has to hold that if one's investigational approach is not the best available approach for gaining true beliefs and avoiding false ones, then one is not being epistemically responsible in using that approach. I don't think this inference holds

up, and the primary reason is that epistemic responsibility has a strong social dimension that makes it distinct from mere truth conduciveness.

The social dimension of epistemic responsibility can be thought of in terms of intellectual virtues; it includes any intellectual virtues that contribute to truth or rationality in the beliefs of others. These same intellectual virtues might also contribute to truth or rationality in your own beliefs, but part of the reason they are considered intellectual virtues is their contribution to the beliefs of others. The view that epistemic responsibility has a social dimension is alive in the literature on epistemic responsibility from its beginnings. For Lorraine Code, epistemic responsibility, like other intellectual virtues, should be understood as benefitting more than just the possessor but the community as well. (Code, 1987, p. 60) It is clear that in Code's view, epistemic responsibility is as much a responsibility to others as it is a responsibility to one's self. And in the wider literature on virtue epistemology, traits such as originality and intellectual courage are considered intellectual virtues despite the fact that they might very well not be truth conducive for the individuals that possess them (though they are conducive to the advancement of human knowledge). (Zagzebski, 1996, p. 462 and p. 465)

The reason that Huemer's argument does not impugn the epistemic responsibility of critical thinking is that critical thinking does a far better job of satisfying the social dimension of epistemic responsibility than Huemer's Credulity and Skepticism strategies do. For one thing, forming beliefs through critical thinking enhances your ability to give good reasons for your beliefs. This ability is an intellectual virtue that contributes to improvement in the beliefs of others by challenging their beliefs, by giving them new reasons for their beliefs, or merely engaging them in productive discussion. The Credulity and Skepticism strategies, on the other hand, contribute little or nothing to the cultivation of intellectual virtues like this one. If these strategies are truth conducive, they are conducive to truth only for the individuals who follow these strategies. They do not contribute to on-going debates; they do not lead to improvements in the beliefs and the thinking of others.

Intellectual courage is another intellectual virtue that is part of the social dimension of epistemic responsibility. Having the fortitude to hold on to unpopular beliefs and ideas in the face of challenge can, to some degree, be of benefit to your own beliefs, but the prime beneficiary of one person's intellectual courage is the surrounding group or community. (Montmarquet, 1993, p. 28) People with intellectual courage challenge received wisdom in groups, standing in the way of the pernicious phenomenon known as "groupthink." (Janis, 1971) Such people also keep alive unpopular views that might gain wider acceptance in the future. In either case, intellectual courage is of benefit to the beliefs of others.

Because it has a social dimension, epistemic responsibility requires more than just practices conducive to gaining true beliefs and avoiding false ones. Epistemic responsibility calls for making the right sort of contributions to group efforts, including contributions to productive debates on the issues. Huemer's Credulity and Skepticism strategies, as I've argued in section 2.3, would lead adherents to engage in truly bizarre belief-behavior that flies in the face of epistemic responsibility.

One cannot salvage Huemer's argument by conceding that it fails to raise doubts about the epistemic responsibility of critical thinking while contending that it raises important doubts on a lesser charge, such as being insufficiently reliable or truth conducive. These lesser charges do not bear on the value of critical thinking in the way that epistemic responsibility does. Truth conduciveness is just part of the picture; the concept of epistemic responsibility puts together a full picture of what's at stake when we form our beliefs.

3. CRITICAL THINKING AND CONSISTENCY

Huemer gives a second argument against critical thinking as an approach to forming beliefs. This one charges the underlying "theory" of critical thinking with inconsistency. Huemer believes that there is a problem with critical thinking in that it has us privilege our own inferences and our own reliability over the inferences and reliability of others who have a similar commitment to critical thinking and who are similar to us in terms of knowledge and critical thinking ability.

Imagine that you are talking to someone (let's call him Frank) whom you know to be a nonexpert on a particular issue, to have no cognitive advantages over you, and to be a dedicated to the practice of critical thinking. Likewise, you have no expertise on that issue. Frank tells you that he has applied his critical thinking skills to the issue and on that basis he assures you of the truth of one of the competing positions. Does Frank's sincere effort and testimony give you a sufficient basis for reasonable belief?

Almost anyone would say no, deeming that Frank is not a reliable source on this issue. This leads Huemer to ask this question: If the techniques involved in critical thinking are not reliable in the hands of an average nonexpert, then why should anyone be advised to rely on those techniques? Moreover, why should we ourselves rely on our critical thinking abilities in forming beliefs regarding issues on which we lack expertise? (p. 526)

For Huemer, the problem with a critical-thinking-based strategy is that

> …it posits an agent-centered epistemic norm: it holds that, if a person applies certain techniques in arriving at a conclusion, then *she* has good reason to accept that conclusion, but others who know that she arrived at the conclusion by those techniques do *not* thereby have good reason to accept it. It is unclear why this should be so. (p. 526)

Huemer is right that anyone who advocates critical thinking as a basis for belief formation is advocating an agent-centered epistemic norm. And there is a sort of inconsistency involved in privileging your own conclusions over the conclusions drawn by others. But this doesn't have to be a problem. Huemer provides no reasons why we should be concerned about this sort of inconsistency, and in the absence of any good argument to the contrary, this inconsistency seems appropriate rather pernicious. The agent-centered epistemic norm that underlies the use of one's own critical thinking in belief formation actually accords well with epistemic responsibility. When one is involved in an on-going discussion or debate about a

controversial ethical or public-policy issue, it is epistemically responsible to privilege one's own beliefs. To renounce one's own beliefs at every credible challenge blocks possibilities for meaningful debate and other exchanges of ideas. The intellectual courage to stick to one's beliefs is an important component of epistemic responsibility.

I should add that the agent-centered epistemic norm behind critical thinking is not as extreme as Huemer makes it out to be. I've argued in section 2.2 that critical thinking is compatible with taking into account the opinions of experts. And a more general case can be made to the effect that critical thinking is compatible with taking into account the opinions of others in privileged epistemic positions, including the opinions of nonexpert witnesses.

4. CONCLUSION

I've argued that Huemer's skeptical argument fails in two respects. The first is that the alternatives to critical thinking that are considered in his argument are not feasible. There is some doubt about whether human beings could follow those alternative strategies, and if they could follow those strategies it would leave them cognitively hobbled. The second is that Huemer's argument measures the value of critical thinking entirely in terms of its truth conduciveness with respect the beliefs of the individuals who might adopt the critical thinking approach. At the same time, his argument is ostensibly about epistemic responsibility. I've argued that while epistemic responsibility is the right yardstick by which to judge the value of critical thinking, Huemer's argument never really touches on epistemic responsibility because it never considers its social dimension. Moreover, the investigative approaches that Huemer purports to be superior to any critical-thinking-based approach would fail utterly in satisfying this social dimension.

These two objections to Huemer's argument converge in that they involve looking beyond the truth conduciveness of critical thinking and even beyond the benefits that critical thinking offers for the critical thinker's own system of beliefs. This is instructive; it suggests that to give a good account of the foundations of critical thinking, we need to develop a more complete picture of what critical thinking is good for. This includes looking at the value of critical thinking to groups—communities, professional bodies, corporations, and entire societies. Virtue epistemology and social epistemology can provide insight in this regard.

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